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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: METN BY-ELECTION RESULT ALLOWS FRANCE TO RELAX A  
BIT ON LEBANON

REF: PARIS 3298

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt

¶1. (C) Summary: The French MFA told us August 9 that FM Kouchner's anticipated August 25 return to Beirut was more tentative than public statements and press reporting have indicated since the hotly contested Metn by-election last weekend has not led to violence. The new DAS-equivalent for the Levant and Syria/Lebanon desk officer said FM Kouchner remains "available" to fly back at any time and that special envoy Cousseran similarly is keeping his bags packed and by the door. But pragmatism and concern that any trip achieve results are now paramount as Paris waits for next developments, including whether Nabih Berri's efforts yield anything tangible. With the fear that some sort of "security incident" could occur always in the background, the Quai has shelved the idea of a smaller follow-up committee drawn from the factions represented at la Celle Saint-Cloud. New French ambassador Andre Parant will arrive earlier than planned (August 16) to make initial contacts and recommend next steps. His residence will no doubt be a stop in the increasingly prominent "parade" of presidential wannabes, and our contacts were curious whether any have passed through Washington. The MFA doubts Presidents Bush and Sarkozy will say much about Lebanon when they meet on August 11, but the French message will be a request for even closer "concertation" in the crucial weeks ahead. In that context, the MFA was a bit surprised by the August 1 executive order freezing assets in the U.S. belonging to persons undermining Lebanon's sovereignty, democracy, and institutions. Arab League Secretary General Musa floated an idea with Kouchner about a possible forum involving the League, Egypt, France, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia. Although Kouchner did not rule out the idea, he would prefer to focus on France's initiative first. End comment

¶2. (C) Newly arrived MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille and Syria/Lebanon desk officer Jean-Christophe Auge on August 9 sought to project a less frantic and more phlegmatic attitude toward the political situation in Lebanon following the recent parliamentary by-elections. They largely shared our bottom line analysis of the results -- no decisive winners or losers (except in the latter category Amine Gemayel, whose Quixotic bid for another term as president seems over) and a marginally more fractured Christian community -- and indicated that the Quai has come down a bit from the elevated state of alert leading up to the poll. All current signs, Pouille and Auge continued, point to relative calm and stability for the time being, notwithstanding the always present threat of some unexpected "security incident." (Comment: Both stressed the

GOF had no information suggesting anything was imminent. End comment) With a significant number of Lebanon's political class decamping for vacation, the French embassy was finding it harder to find anyone with whom to carry on a dialogue.

13. (C) Interestingly, Pouille and Auge stated that FM Kouchner's once fairly firm plans to return to Beirut to resume his efforts to resolve Lebanon's political impasse the weekend of August 25 are less certain. They repeatedly affirmed that Kouchner remains "available" and ready to return, but the GOF would decide whether to send him back only if doing so would be effective. Pouille explained part of this "pragmatism" in terms of France's analysis of the parties' attitudes and the progress of Nabih Berri's own efforts to find common ground between March 14 and the opposition. He and Auge, however, noted that Kouchner's staff is concerned that a number of other possible urgent missions may come up and want to preserve the minister's flexibility to take them on. If the Lebanese say they need Kouchner to return as planned, he will do so. Special envoy Jean Claude Cousseran, meanwhile, continues to stand by and was told not to stray too far on vacation lest he need to fly out on short notice. Pouille and Auge confirmed that the arrival of France's new ambassador to Lebanon, Andre Parant, has been moved up by at least ten days to August 16 to minimize any impression that France was less concerned about the situation.

14. (C) The idea of setting up some sort of "follow-up committee" comprising an elect group of Lebanese politicians drawn from the 14 groups represented at la Celle Saint-Cloud has been shelved but not abandoned. Auge explained that the muted reaction to the Metn by-election result and the consequent doldrums in Beirut were key factors in setting

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this idea aside. Doing that certainly avoided running the risk of arousing the ire of those who would not have made the cut in what Auge said would have been a slightly larger grouping of eight or nine in place of the originally envisaged group of five. Not abandoning the idea completely, according to Auge, would give Parant the option of considering the concept after he makes his first round of consultations. Switching gears slightly, Auge asked whether the growing number of prospective presidential candidates had extended their "parade" (the French word he used is often heard in the context of fashion shows) to Washington. We responded that a number of presidential wannabes or their confidantes were actively lobbying our ambassador in Beirut but we were not aware that such activity had yet seriously extended to Washington. Pouille and Auge suggested that Lebanese politicians are more and more focused on identifying who might be the next president, and the French are hearing many of the same names and scenarios we are. Pouille said France is most closely watching Michel Aoun's efforts and signs as to whether his putative support from Hizballah is firming up in a meaningful way.

15. (C) Pouille, who had only started the day before, joined a meeting already in progress with Auge to ask for a copy of a paper on Lebanon Auge was preparing for the August 11 lunch between French President Sarkozy and President Bush. Despite the apparent considerable length of the document, Pouille expressed doubt that Lebanon would occupy much of the presidents' time at the lunch. If they do discuss the current political situation, he indicated Sarkozy would laud our two countries' close cooperation and call for an even closer "concertation" in the crucial weeks ahead.

16. (C) In response to an August 7 request from Auge for information about the August 1 executive order blocking property of persons undermining the sovereignty of Lebanon or the democratic processes and institutions, and in the absence of formal guidance, we provided texts of the order and information drawn from press guidance. Pouille and Auge asked what specifically had triggered the decision and

wondered whether it was related to the present crisis. We responded, again without guidance, that the latest measure followed up on the visa ban announced in June. The bureaucratically more cumbersome process of applying financial restrictions, we noted, likely accounted for the lag between the measures. The interagency process of identifying the figures covered by the latest order could also take some time, although we have stated publicly our determination to compile a list as quickly as possible. From our perspective, the degree to which individuals in Lebanon and elsewhere worried as to whether these measures would apply to them and saw a linkage to what is happening in Lebanon could be a useful additional form of pressure at this sensitive time. When asked whether the GOF would consider similar actions against figures identified on any list, Pouille, who just returned to Paris from the French UN mission in New York, demurred, stating that France prefers to take such actions via the UN or in concert with other members of the EU.

17. (C) One of the last things Pouille asked was whether Arab League Secretary General 'Amr Musa had floated his idea of a broader-based initiative focused on Lebanon. This was intended to group together Egypt, France, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia with the Arab League and might include the holding of some sort of "forum" to agree on a joint plan of action. Pouille stressed that Musa's thinking was very much more of an "idea" and not a "proposal." FM Kouchner, who heard this directly from Musa when he was recently in Cairo, did not dismiss Musa's idea, but he stated France's intention to proceed with its current efforts to promote intra-Lebanese dialogue to spur a Lebanese solution to their problems.

Comment

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18. (C) Lebanon's relative quiescence following the Metn by-election result, notwithstanding the bitter accompanying rhetoric, seems to have given the MFA a bit of a breather. Kouchner's staff may also be absorbing the many commitments the minister is taking on and trying to reduce his hyperactivity to a more manageable level. In addition to commitments outside France that he may already have or may be weighing, we know that the annual conference of French ambassadors starts in Paris August 27, i.e., the Monday after Kouchner would return from Beirut. The core message, in the

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absence of renewed violence, seems to be "if you need me, call me. Otherwise, I'm going to try to get a few days of vacation, too."

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